

Wine Spectator

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Carneros: The Other Napa

Discovering the quiet charms of low-key Carneros

Daniel Sogg

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Carneros is for the birds. They're everywhere, squawking and twittering, swooping and soaring toward a place at (or on) the dinner table. Maybe it's the proximity of San Pablo Bay that lures them, or the terrain bursting with greenery.

Then again, maybe it's the grapes, an ample food source incapable of flight. The birds clearly know something overlooked by many wine lovers, who usually fly past this area on their way toward the hallowed Cabernet country of northern Napa. Winemakers have been here since the early '70s, and there's a wealth of beautiful sights -- and quality wine -- to be discovered.

The Carneros region straddles Napa and Sonoma counties. The Napa section is accessible from San Francisco by way of either the Bay Bridge, which is sometimes a bit faster or, for a more scenic route, the Golden Gate. Although many producers here only receive guests by appointment, the intimacy of these smaller operations makes for a memorable visit.

But it's not only the boutique estates that deserve a visit. Begin the day at Domaine Carneros, a massive chateau perched on a bluff overlooking Highway 12. A French and an American flag mark the entrance, in deference to the fact that the 45,000-case sparkling wine specialist is owned by Champagne producer Taittinger.

It's a setting worthy of an Old World chateau. The estate grounds are immaculate, with roses, precisely trimmed hedges, willows and ornamental cherry



Domaine Carneros

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trees. Consider bypassing the half-hour tour **Country Travel** (which begins with a filmed marketing paean to the glory of Champagne); instead, relax on the stone terrace with a glass of the 1995 Le Rève and survey the rolling Pinot Noir and Chardonnay vineyards.

Two minutes' drive south along Duhig Road is the turnoff for Acacia Winery, a Carneros Chardonnay and Pinot Noir specialist surrounded by a sea of vines. This lovely site overlooks the Napa River as it meanders into the bay. On a clear day, prominent San Francisco structures such as the Bank of America building and Transamerica Pyramid are readily visible.

The winery itself is no-fuss and no-frills. Guests can try five complimentary wines or pay \$10 to sample the single-vineyard bottlings. Tours into the vineyard take their cue from the growth cycle; at harvest, for example, expect to sample grapes as they approach ideal ripeness.

Ten minutes from Acacia, about halfway to Napa, is Truchard, a 380-acre family operation founded in 1973 on just 20 acres. Truchard is open by appointment only, and the morning guests pick the wines to be tasted that day. But even if someone else chose the bottles, you can't go wrong at this outstanding estate. The vineyard has a range of exposures, soil types and elevations suited to a remarkable variety of grapes (10 at last count). Owners Tony and Jo Ann Truchard (and the family cat, Snowball) spend up to an hour with guests, tasting and strolling through the vineyards and caves.

From Truchard, it's another 10 minutes' drive into the city of Napa for lunch at Copia: the American Center for Wine, Food and the Arts. The new \$55 million facility, which opened in November, has a restaurant called Julia's Kitchen, named for Julia Child. It's a buoyant place, artfully designed to meld form and function, with an open kitchen, cement floors and brushed steel chairs. Diners can order à la carte or get the five-course tasting menu for \$55 (\$75 with four wine pairings). Try the buttery, pan-seared shrimp, served with flageolets and a crustacean sauce, or the Dungeness crab consommé, a bit salty but intensely flavorful, with a spot-on accent of shaved fennel.

There's also deli service -- sandwiches, grilled panini and hot dogs -- at the adjoining American Market Café. These are best enjoyed at a terrace table shaded by olive trees alongside the 3.5-acre Copia gardens.

Between the interactive museum, art gallery and cooking demonstrations, Copia has more than enough to fill a day. Don't leave without stopping by the *Wine Spectator* Tasting Table, which offers a by-the-glass selection of more than 50 wines from around the world.

It's only about 50 minutes back to San Francisco, but if you'd prefer to stay the night, consider the Milliken Creek Inn in Napa. This 10-room jewel sits along a placid stretch of the Napa River. Most of the rooms are in a converted 1857 carriage house, though accommodations in the 1990 addition are every bit as charming. The decor is very Englishman-in-India, with rattan and leather lounge chairs, a tropical leaf ceiling fan and bed frames crafted of wood and wicker.

Or stop at the RMS Brandy Distillery on your way back to the city. The barrel room is as dark and dignified as an old monastery, redolent of the 4,000 Limousin oak barrels that exhale a medley of intoxicating aromas. The highly informed guide mixes anecdote with information, detailing the A to Z of brandy production. The tour concludes in the Snifter Room. By law, there's no tasting offered, but you can buy a bottle for a nightcap later at the hotel.

Acacia Winery

2750 Las Amigas Road, Napa

Telephone (707) 226-9991

Fax (707) 226-1685

Web site www.acaciawinery.com

Open By appointment only

Copia: The American Center for Wine, Food & the Arts

500 First St., Napa

Telephone (888) 512-6742

Web site www.copia.org

Open Oct. 1 to May 15, Thursday to Monday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; May 16 to Sept. 30, Sunday, Monday and Wednesday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Thursday to Saturday, 10 a.m. to 7 p.m.

Wine Spectator Tasting Table

Open Regular Copia business hours

Cost 2-ounce and 5-ounce tastings; prices vary

Julia's Kitchen

Open Call for hours and reservations

Cost Entrées \$17 to \$27

Domaine Carneros

1240 Duhig Road, Napa

Telephone (707) 257-0101

Fax (707) 257-3020

Open Daily, 10:30 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Milliken Creek Inn

1815 Silverado Trail, Napa

Telephone (888) 622-5775

Fax (707) 255-3112

Web site www.mil likencreekinn.com

Rooms 4

Suites 6

Rates \$225 to \$495

RMS Brandy Distillery

1250 Cuttings Wharf Road, Napa

Telephone (707) 253-9055

Fax (707) 253-0116

Web site www.rmsbrandy.com

Open Daily, 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

Truchard Vineyards

3234 Old Sonoma Road, Napa

Telephone (707) 253-7153

Fax (707) 253-7234

Web site www.truchardvineyard.com

Open By appointment only

